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**7.** What examples did Stevenson share of low-income individuals and/or people of color in difficult circumstances being presumed guilty before presenting their cases? He writes, "Executions are an example of how policies and norms are used to control and punish blacks." Why are 80% of people on death row convicted of crimes against whites while 65% of homicide victims are black? Why is a death sentence more likely if a defendant is black and the victim is white? Do you think race and class should factor into a court case? Please explain your reasoning.

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**8.** Walter McMillian was the 50th person exonerated from death row in the United States. Today, 146 people have been exonerated, many after serving decades in prison. What challenges do you think formerly incarcerated people, whether deemed innocent or not, face when they reenter their community? What support, if any, do you believe the government should grant former prisoners? Once proven innocent, do you believe an exoneree should receive compensation for their wrongful incarceration? Please explain your reasoning. Why are states, as Alabama was in McMillian's case, unwilling to accept responsibility for wrongful convictions?

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**9.** In 2010, in *Graham v. Florida*, the Supreme Court ruled that sentencing juveniles to life without parole for non-homicides is unconstitutional. And in 2012, in *Miller v. Alabama* and *Jackson v. Hobbs*, the Supreme Court ruled that juveniles convicted of murder cannot be subject to a mandatory sentence of life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. According to the ACLU, approximately 2,570 children, some as young as 13 years old, have been sentenced to life without parole in the United States. How does incarceration affect children differently than adults? Do you agree with Stevenson that punishments for children are "intense and reactionary"? Should all juvenile offenders sentenced to life without parole be eligible for a new sentencing hearing? How should families of victims murdered by juveniles be involved in sentencing hearings, if at all? What difficulties or complications could arise within the system if all juveniles sentenced to life without parole are granted new hearings?

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**10.** Many prisoners who have spent years on death row or in solitary confinement describe their experience as being buried alive. Prisoners are often subjected to rape, assault, and violence and have an increased risk of suicide. What protections should exist for incarcerated people? Do you believe that putting someone in uninterrupted solitary confinement for 18 years, as we read in the case of Ian Manuel, is ever warranted? Do you believe additional protections should exist for juveniles? What kind of punishment, if any, should exist in prisons?

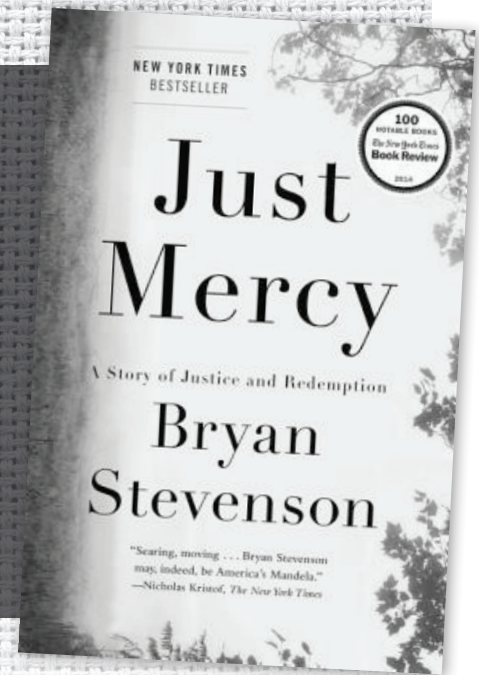
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# Book Club in a Bag

## Discussion Questions

"Every bit as moving as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and in some ways more so . . . a searing indictment of American criminal justice and a stirring testament to the salvation that fighting for the vulnerable sometimes yields."

- David Cole,  
*The New York  
Review of Books*



Kalamazoo  
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**Bryan Stevenson** is the executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, and a professor of law at New York University Law School. He has won relief for dozens of condemned prisoners, argued five times before the Supreme Court, and won national acclaim for his work challenging bias against the poor and people of color. He has received numerous awards, including the MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Grant.

## Book Summary

Bryan Stevenson was a young lawyer when he founded the Equal Justice

Initiative, a legal practice dedicated to defending those most desperate and in need: the poor, the wrongly condemned, and women and children trapped in the farthest reaches of our criminal justice system. One of his first cases was that of Walter McMillian, a young man who was sentenced to die for a notorious murder he insisted he didn’t commit. The case drew Bryan into a tangle of conspiracy, political machination, and legal brinksmanship—and transformed his understanding of mercy and justice forever.

*Just Mercy* is at once an unforgettable account of an idealistic, gifted young lawyer’s coming of age, a moving window into the lives of those he has defended, and an inspiring argument for compassion in the pursuit of true justice.

## Discussion Questions

**1.** Stevenson remembers his grandmother telling him throughout his childhood, “You can’t understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close.” How do we see the author getting close to issues of punishment and mass incarceration throughout the book? What are some examples of Stevenson getting close to the incarcerated people he works with? How does getting close to Walter McMillian affect his life? Stevenson writes that injustice occurs when “we allow fear, anger, and distance to shape the way we treat the most vulnerable among us.” As you begin your collegiate studies, how will you get close to the issues that are most important to you?

**2.** After working with low-income and incarcerated people for many years, Stevenson came to believe that “the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice.” How do you see poverty affecting people’s lives in *Just Mercy*? Are there any examples of poverty and justice existing at the same time? What are some of the different meanings of the word “just” used throughout the book? Have Stevenson’s experiences influenced your own definition of justice?

**3.** As you read the book, what were your reactions to descriptions of the criminal justice system? Why does the author compare his own brokenness to the brokenness of the system? Do you believe that broken people can be healed? What does it mean to show mercy within a broken system?

**4.** Stevenson writes that there are four primary institutions that shape the conversation around race and justice today: slavery, racial terror and the threat of violence against people of color, Jim Crow laws that legalized segregation, and mass incarceration. How do you see these institutions affecting cases throughout the book? What examples of racial discrimination within the legal system can you find within the text? How do we see the history of racial bias in the United States impacting prisons today?

**5.** Were you surprised by the prevalence of improper legal representation in the cases profiled in *Just Mercy*? What examples of discriminatory jury selection does Stevenson share? What factors do you believe should influence jury selection? Explain your reasoning. Numerous examples of judicial misconduct are also cited in *Just Mercy*, from destruction of evidence to prosecutorial misconduct. Why do you think sheriffs, lawyers, and other government officials proven guilty of misconduct are still on active duty? What reforms, if any, do you believe should be made to the legal system?

**6.** There are countless examples within the text of courts refusing to review new evidence or grant new trials, stating that it is too late for new information. We also hear about the media experiencing “innocence fatigue.” What do you believe contributes to indifference towards claims of innocence? Should people with claims of innocence have their cases reviewed in a timelier manner? Should victims’ family members be involved in the review of innocence cases? Do you believe our legal system operates under the principle of innocent until proven guilty? Please support your argument.